

Firefighter as Healer

An ethnographic project by Alyssa Goldberg

The healer that I interviewed is a hero who just wants to help others. He is a firefighter at the Burlington City Fire Company. His uncle began taking him to the firehouse when he was just a kid. He started learning the equipment at a young age. So when he became 16 years old, he officially joined the firehouse as a 'junior,' meaning he was able to start getting on the fire truck and helping at on scenes. The senior firefighters would begin to teach in preparation for fire school. At the age of 17, he enrolled in fire school and 6 months later he graduated as a firefighter. He explained that the majority of his family is in the fire service or members of the emergency squad. He credits his uncle for introducing the firehouse to him. To this day, he still manages to find the time to volunteer and hangout with his buddies who are also firefighters. They have become very, very close over the years. "These are my brothers/sisters," he says, "we put our lives in each other's hands, we are family." Ever since he first walked into the fire services, this is all he's ever wanted to do. He also explains that he has always had this deep feeling of wanting to give back to the community. He didn't have much growing up and things were rough at times. As a young teenager, the firehouse was his home away from home. He would hang out with kids and senior firefighters who would go through similar things in their childhoods and would feel the same way about helping people. "Let's face it, every kid wants to be a firefighter, I'm lucky enough to live out this dream," he explains. The people in this profession just about have the same personalities. They all want to give back to the community. He describes that most to all first responders have this need to nurture component intertwined in their personalities. He says "Honestly, when we start of as young firefighters, like I did, you joined for the social status, for the thrill. But as training when on, we realize we just want to help. We want to bring hope to these people who are probably going through one of the most traumatic times in their lives. I'd say 85-90% of firefighters had some sort of trauma during their childhoods. We all choose the path after leaving our childhoods to better our community. So not only can we help the victims of our community, but we also help each other. It's a

brotherhood/sisterhood.” He goes on to mention that this ‘call’ has really changed his life, for the better. With wide eyes, he says that responsibility was his main life change. When you’re a young firefighter, you realize very quickly that one mess up, or slightest mistake can take the life of another, including his own. “I learned to appreciate each day, I’ve had a few close calls in my career as a firefighter,” as he looks down at his feet clearly remembering a more unfortunate time which he declined to mention. “Now, I make sure to hug my kids a little tighter after rough calls. But in the end, a simple thank you makes this job all worth the while and knowing that you helped the public in one way or another, plus, I get to play with the sirens doing it” as he smiles.

The education process is always ongoing. Like we’ve mentioned before, Fire I, is the first course firefighters must take in order to become certified which is 6 months. There are many other optional courses. But in order to keep your certification current, you must take what we call CEU’s or continuing education credits. Things are constantly changing and tools are becoming more advanced, so they have to be up to date on the latest equipment and what people are using to build houses for example. Firefighter are always training. In the Fire I course, the teaching is a combination of lecture and hands on training. Occasionally, firefighters must attend lectures but the majority of ongoing training is hands on experience; for example, the firehouse has weekly training to make sure their skills for each tool on technique is up to date. The bonding amongst firefighters is just as important. The technology is a huge part of this job and it’s constantly being replaced with newer and more advanced equipment. The tools must be checked daily to ensure proper use, they never know when they’ll be needed. He explains,

“For example, our fire truck is loaded with just about every tool you can think of from several different types of axes to airbags that lift up cars. My personal favorite, is the pick-head axe. It’s multi-purposeful for taking down walls, searching a house, or use it to escape a burning building. I can also use it to break windows and pop tires on cars in order to rescue the victim involved in a motor vehicle accident. The coolest tool we have would definitely

be the thermal-imaging camera. This can detect the heat signature of a human or an animal in a smoky black-out building, it can also tell me how hot the fire is.”

He then walked me through a vague scenario when responding to a scene. For a burning residence, the alarms go off, firefighters respond to the station and they don the gear. They arrive to the call and notify central command what they see and request back up if needed. Firefighters are given specific tasks. Consisting of a search team and nozzle team. The search team goes into the building looking for people while the nozzle team attempts to put the flames out. As other trucks arrive on scene, they also have different tasks. These guys work like a well-oiled machine in order to save the victims and their properties, which is why bonding is so important.

His healing philosophy is simple, “I just try my best to support and rescue victims.” If they’re conscious victims, I explain exactly what I’m doing and ask questions about themselves so they stay focused on what I’m doing and distracted from the scary situation. Talking to the victims of these traumatic events is the beginning stages of healing. For example, firefighters are trained to be able to communicate with a victim in a car accident while I’m working to get them out. There are several aspects of the victims overall health we are concerned with as firefighter in order to get them to EMS. We usually arrive before the ambulance and we must know basic medical knowledge. They are required to be certified in CPR and first aid which includes simple splinting of broken bones, back boarding or covering burns to name a few. On scene with victims can be rough. “Like I said before, for most people if we are called, it usually is one of the worst days in someone’s life.” So firefighters may not be trained psychologists, but they know how to talk to people and how to calm them down. He explains that having three kids of his own he usually the guy who talks to the children on traumatic scenes. For example, it was his idea that the fire trucks carry several stuffed animals so that when we get to a car accident or a building fire, I have something to give the children and they can then usually tell me what happened and if they have any pain. Overall, you must be a good listener in order to be a great firefighter. The only preventative medicine that these firefighters perform are fire

alarms and carbon monoxide alarms checks to ensure they're working properly throughout the community. Measurement of success in terms of a burning building would be that the fire is kept to one room or the building isn't a total loss. In terms of an accident scene, the victim is rescued quickly and safely. Sometimes their practice can be difficult to run. "In the current health system, we are the street guys. We are first on scene whether it be a car accident or a burning building. It's tough, especially being our community is not wealthy. In order to receive these lifesaving tools, we usually run fundraisers within our community because we just don't receive enough money from government grants and gracious donations. We pride ourselves on being completely volunteer," he explains. They give it all that they can to support a large community.

I asked him to tell me a story that stood out the most in all his years of fighting fire. After several minutes of contemplation he said there are so many. Finally, he began to tell me about a story involving two women who drove into a pole. The driver had lost control of her mini-van and drove head first into a telephone pole. The mini-van began to fill with smoke as the Burlington City fire truck rolled up. He explained that he immediately ran to the side of the driver and carefully extricated her after several failed attempts to get her out safely. "The key to all this," he says, "is remaining calm and talking to the patient, explaining everything maintaining that calm, confident voice." Another firefighter was able to get the passenger. As they are taking the women out of the van, it caught fire. Just in the nick of time, he and his buddy simultaneously pulled these women out just barely missing the flames. "It was like something out a movie," he said chuckling. After the women were brought to safety and transferred to EMS, they had a new problem on their hands. The telephone had also caught fire. This requires special tactics because it's now an electrical fire. After about an hour, they were finally able to put out the flames with a special fire extinguisher. In the end, they had been working vigorously for approximately two hours and they were exhausted and thirsty. They hadn't realized it, until they knew the women were safe and the flame were out. Their dedication and selfless acts continue to amaze me and all these guys want is their own satisfaction that they were able to help.

The firehouse become part of who these men and women are, it's in their blood. They'll sacrifice time with their own families on weekends/holidays/birthdays/etc. to save the lives of random strangers. They don't do this because they have to, they do this because they want to. He and these other firefighters don't want anything in return, they just want to give back to their communities. No monetary funds are needed, a simple thank you keeps these firefighters going.